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Together They Won: Sam T. Rayburn and the Fourth Congressional District During World War II

BY WILLIAM MCWHORTER

Many historians consider Samuel T. Rayburn one of the United States' most influential congressmen and Speakers of the U.S. House of Representatives. Thus, more often than not, historical research tends to focus much more on his presence in Washington D.C. and his role in national issues, such as the Lend-Lease Act and the Rural Electric Administration, rather than his duties as a representative of his Congressional District. Rayburn's participation in national war legislation certainly benefitted the nation, but it also paid dividends within his home district and allowed the people of the Fourth Congressional District of Texas to have a tangible role in waging and winning World War II.

Rayburn responded to the concerns and demands of his constituency prior to, during, and after World War II, and such a response had definitive consequences and significance. Rayburn used his power and seniority in Congress to not only help the United States counter totalitarianism, but to also enhance the fortunes of Northeast Texas. This article is an example of how we can explore intimate facets of a significant national political figure by removing him from his high-profile position in Washington, D.C., and placing him within his congressional district, we can begin to explore Rayburn's connection to his constituency—thus gaining a deeper understanding of the insight, motivation, and inspiration of this accomplished political leader.

In a temporary exhibit on display at the Sam Rayburn House Museum State Historic Site in 2006, the Texas Historical Commission (THC) interpreted Sam Rayburn as a political leader during World War II and focused on Rayburn's accomplishments for the Fourth District via his dual role as a U.S. Congressman and Speaker of the House. The exhibit built upon the newly commissioned THC multi-year, multi-faceted, "Texas in World War II Initiative," a program to honor and

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preserve the memories of Texans who served in the armed forces during World War II and the contributions they made to the war effort. This well-received temporary exhibit that interpreted Rayburn's wartime activities at the district—housed within the museum's visitor center—offered one way to keep the interpretation of Sam Rayburn fresh and exciting and allowed visitors to explore another facet of Rayburn's life.

Between 1939 and 1941, America slowly, but steadily, prepared itself for an impending war. Rayburn's actions as a local Congressman and later as Speaker were critically important in promoting pre-war preparedness and the eventual efficient management of the war effort on both the national and congressional district level. According to professor and author Anthony Champagne, who has written extensively on the Speakership and Rayburn, "Rayburn was a master at orchestrating his politics between Washington and Bonham."¹ Prior to World War II, Congressman Rayburn's Fourth District grew to include seven counties: Collin, Fannin, Grayson, Hunt, Rains, Rockwall and Kaufman. Speaker Rayburn was aware that to win World War II the federal government would need to spend vast sums of revenue. In response to direct constituency requests for aid, Rayburn wrote directly to Secretary of War Henry Stimson on numerous occasions to procure federal facilities and revenue within the Fourth District. Throughout the pre-war mobilization years and during the war, Rayburn secured, increased, and utilized as many federal military projects as possible for his constituents. Such facilities included airfields, hospitals, prisoner of war camps, and home front defense industries.

Speaker Rayburn's Fourth District constituents frequently solicited him to speak on their behalf, and his power and seniority allowed him to successfully fulfill their requests. A perusal of Rayburn's personal correspondence demonstrates the Speaker's genuine concern and work for his constituents. Multiple volumes of correspondence, from before and during the war, between Rayburn and his Fourth District constituency chronicle his efforts to secure badly needed federal spending for his district still suffering the effects of the Great Depression.²

Shortly before American involvement in World War II, Rayburn assisted his constituents in various pre-war military preparedness programs. In Grayson County, Rayburn helped push through the legislation needed to procure funding for the construction of the Denison Dam-Lake Texoma project on the Red River, an undertaking

that marked the largest government project in Rayburn's district during his congressional career. Authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1938, the United States Army Corps of Engineers began construction in 1939 to curb the region's susceptibility to flooding, as well as to create a source for hydroelectric power, conservation, and recreation. During the spring of 1943, the project gained regional notoriety when German *Afrika Korps* prisoners of war were used to clear trees in one of the first area work programs for enemy prisoners of war.³

A farmer in his earlier years, Rayburn knew the importance of good roads in order to transport crops to market. He worked diligently before the war to designate Texas State Highway 24 as a "Defense Highway," which he succeeded in doing in November 1941. Two and a half years later, Rayburn successfully shepherded the passage of the Farm-to-Market Roads Program in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944, which greatly aided not only his district but the nation.⁴

As opportunities to assist his district appeared before and during the war so, too, did many complaints from his constituents, many of whom believed federal governmental spending projects neglected their region. Rayburn's district was a rural district, and the larger financial and industrial districts of Texas in Houston and Dallas, along the oil fields further to the west, quite often received the largesse of federal aid. The farmers, ranchers, and families of enlisted men in the Fourth District were upset with federal regulations on the workweek, which they believed unjust and untenable given their livelihoods. Union workers under the War Labor Board received time and a half pay for work over the set 40-hour workweek, hours that almost every agricultural worker in Northeast Texas exceeded. In a letter to Rayburn, a woman from Royce City (Rockwall County) wrote, "[F]armers, ranchers and soldiers all worked well over 40 hours per week and saw no such federal legislation enacted to reflect their laborious contributions to the war effort."⁵ Although the Congressman considered such concerns sincere (and he indicated so in a reply to the woman), many complaints that made their way to the Speaker's desk were not as legitimate. Authentic concerns and complaints were mixed with those of political opportunists and naysayers. Rayburn, in August 1943, for the first time publicly referred to those who complained, while American soldiers fought and died, as "Grumlings."⁶ In an attempt to prevent the decline of American morale, he coined a phrase that caught on both in national conversation and in

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political cartoons.

For many in the Fourth District life improved during World War II; for some the war caused great strain. Constituents complained to Rayburn on various topics, ranging from mandatory rationing of gasoline and rubber to the enlistment age for young males. Congressman Rayburn's rural constituents depended upon both gasoline and tires for their livelihoods. In a 1942 letter to Rayburn, a Fourth District constituent wrote, "I do not like to bother you with matters of this kind, yet it is a very serious matter with me . . . Last year I traveled 26,000 miles, and all I can get from the Rationing Board at McKinney (Collin County) is a B-Card. This will give me 470 miles a month, which will not allow me to hold my job."⁷ Many letters written to Congressman Rayburn's office responded quickly to constituent letters, and with equal speed followed up with the appropriate officials. In this case, Rayburn's office contacted the local county tire-rationing board in an attempt to help gain an exemption. Throughout the war, Rayburn attempted to balance the delicate level between what was good for the country and what his district demanded of him, a complex position that often meant he was unable to do both. However, in other instances he was able to bring economic opportunities to his district at a time of great national and personal tragedy.

Prior to and throughout the war Rayburn made sure that Hunt County housed a number of federal projects and facilities. For example, similar to many Texas towns, the people of Greenville welcomed servicemen into their homes and businesses. Commerce became a location for a Civilian Pilot Training Program when it opened at East Texas State Teachers College in May 1940.⁸ As beneficial as the program was to the local Commerce economy, the principal project in the county and, for that fact, the Fourth District during the war, was the Majors Field facility near Greenville. Rayburn used his influence to convince the Civil Aeronautics Administration that the site would be a prime location for a new airport, so in 1939 the Greenville Chamber of Commerce took over the airport project. President Roosevelt, in preparation for the possibility of war, next directed federal funds in 1940 toward the financing of new municipal airport construction across the nation.

Less than one month after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, construction began in January 1943 on what would become the

newly minted U.S. Army Air Corps facilities near Greenville. Rayburn announced in April 1942 that the government would officially convert the civilian air facility into military service with housing for nearly four thousand personnel and services for more than three hundred training aircraft. The Moore Construction Company rapidly turned the former cotton fields and woodlands into a military city, complete with runways and approximately two hundred buildings.⁹ The Basic Flight Training School opened on January 5, 1943, and utilized BT-13 trainer aircraft that arrived from another of Rayburn's contributions to his district, Perrin Field near Sherman. Majors Field had three auxiliary fields to help accommodate the overflow of trainer aircraft from the mother field in Greenville, which provided the cadets ample room to practice their landing and night flying. Between Majors Field and its three satellites, the military built a city roughly half the size of Greenville in less than a year.¹⁰

A contingent of the Women's Army Corps arrived in early 1943 and worked in the hospital and administrative offices of the 385th Sub Depot Air and Service Command. Women Army Service Pilots (WASP) arrived for service in 1944 at Majors Field, and during their time at Majors Field the female pilots retrieved planes from farmers' fields and served as liaisons and test pilots. The military also recruited local Hunt County women to work at the air school. The women received sixty days of training in welding, wood mill-work, and hydraulics, and then went to work replacing men who went to war. The restrictions of the then segregated military meant that the African American soldiers assigned to Majors Field primarily served in the transportation platoon.

The mission of Majors Field changed in late 1944 from basic flight training to fighter pilot training. P-47 Thunderbolt fighters replaced the airfield's compliment of BT-13 trainers. The change in training mission also brought a new unit of foreign Allied flyers to the field when the Republic of Mexico entered on the side of the Allies. The 201st Fighter Squadron of the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force, the *Aguilas Aztecas*, arrived for training at Majors Field on November 29, 1944.¹¹ In less than half a year they completed their basic training and left, eventually arriving for combat duty in the Philippines.

The destruction of the Nazi regime in May 1945 meant the beginning of the end for Majors Field as an active military training facility. The military first placed it on stand-by status until the U.S.

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Army Air Forces determined its future role, and like many airfields across the Lone Star State (and across the nation) toward the end of the war the military deactivated it on July 15, 1945. That November Rayburn and U.S. Senator Tom Connally assisted the City of Greenville and Hunt County to gain authorization for the airfield's conversion to local civilian use, and after the war the site attracted a number of aircraft industries to the town for many years.¹² In historian Thomas E. Alexander's book, *The Stars Were Big and Bright: The United States Army Air Forces and Texas During World War II*, Volume I, Greenville resident Vincent Leibowitz stated, "It [Majors Field] provided the threshold from an agrarian economy to an industrial one." Alexander responded, "The army airfield that ultimately emerged from the initially modest project proved to be a critical turning point in the city's history, reshaping and improving it forever."¹³

During World War II, Rayburn's powerful political position helped the Grayson County economy improve with both the Denison Dam project and Camp Denison, a prisoner of war camp that housed German prisoners used at the Dam project. Perrin Field, a Basic Pilot School, also opened near there in the summer of 1941. Perrin Field hosted four auxiliary fields: Gibbons, Gaskin, Bilbo, and Burton. To free up more men for overseas combat theatres of operation, the U.S. Army assigned the training school a unit of the Women's Army Corps (WAC), the 77th College Training Detachment for the instruction of air crews, as well as a Link Trainer detachment (which utilized flight simulators). The airfield closed in July 1945 and officially deactivated the following year, but the military reactivated it in 1948 as Perrin Air Force Base.¹⁴

Rayburn also assisted the efforts of Collin County to house the fifteen hundred-bed U.S. Army Ashburn General Hospital in McKinney, which opened on May 1, 1943. Named for Col. Percy M. Ashburn, the hospital had its own contingent of prisoners of war, who worked on various maintenance projects at the hospital. The hospital eventually became a Veterans Administration Hospital in January 1945; in his signature style, Rayburn lobbied hospital bureaucrats to hire locally. In doing so, Rayburn showcased at Ashburn General Hospital—probably better than at any other World War II site in his congressional district—the three core desires of the congressman for his northeast Texas constituency: financial opportunity for his constituents in the present, financial opportunity for years to come, and medical assistance

to veterans returning home. In addition to the hospital, Collin County hosted Camp Princeton prisoner of war camp (at the former site of a post-Great Depression Farm Security Administration migrant worker camp), which the City of Princeton tapped for labor to produce various public works, most notably onion and cotton harvesting and the enlargement of the city's park.¹⁵

Rayburn's efforts in Kaufman County, primarily within the county's largest city, Terrell, resulted in the establishment of Camp Kaufman Prisoner of War Camp. Located at a former Civilian Conservation Corps facility, Camp Kaufman was actually a branch camp of Camp Mexia. Like similar POW facilities on the East Texas home front, the camp greatly assisted labor shortages in the county brought on by increased military service and better paying employment opportunities in wartime industries inside and outside of Texas. The enemy soldiers harvested two thousand acres of cotton that would have otherwise been lost, a significant benefit to the local economy.¹⁶ The military placed another branch prisoner of war camp in the county at Farmersville, where prisoners of war once again provided labor for various area farms on projects such as onion harvesting. Of special note, Terrell held the honor of hosting both a unique and nationally significant site, the No. 1 British Flying Training School, where American instructors trained British flying cadets throughout the war. The facility opened after Royal Air Force pilots transferred from Love Field in Dallas to Terrell in August 1941. Like their American counterparts, these flying cadets needed ample air space to learn how to fly, and Boykin, Tarver, Griffith, and the #4 auxiliary fields all supported the Terrell base. The flying school closed on September 1, 1945; today the No. 1 British Flying Training School Museum in Terrell commemorates the facility's efforts in support of America's ally, Great Britain, during World War II.¹⁷

The major military project in Fannin County was Jones Field, one of many contract flying schools across Texas that served the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II. Located north of Bonham, the airfield was originally dedicated as the Bonham city airport in November 1929. The Secretary of War approved building a flying school at the airport in June 1945, and the City of Bonham leased the land and began construction that summer. The school opened on October 4, 1941, and the 302nd Flying Training Detachment assumed command, eventually training hundreds of cadets until the military deactivated the school

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on October 15, 1944. Similar to the other primary fields in Rayburn's district, four auxiliary fields supported training efforts at Jones Field.¹⁸

Fannin County, Rayburn's home, received a small branch prisoner of war camp. A Veterans' domiciliary opened there in 1950 and catered primarily to Fourth District veterans who were unable to care for themselves. Rayburn met the hospital's incoming personnel administrator upon his arrival in Texas and, true to pattern, informed him of the importance of hiring locally for all of the facility's three hundred-fifty positions.¹⁹ In addition to the airfields and training schools, Rayburn assisted in necessary wartime funding to extend city infrastructure to all the installations throughout his district and, in turn, created more jobs for the Fourth District's economy.²⁰

Congressman Rayburn's efforts were not limited to military installations; the war had presented an opportunity to modernize the Fourth District in many ways. Various war-related industries located in the district, chiefly road and highway improvements, as well as the Lone Star Steel Plant, which opened in September 1943 and represented a new industry for the predominantly rural and agricultural Fourth District. Such projects were discernible, tangible symbols of Rayburn's sway in Washington and noteworthy for the small rural district legislator.²¹

Rayburn continued to use his political clout as the war began to de-escalate to extend the life of armed forces facilities, and when possible, divert action occasionally on such projects, or at least, turn over ownership of military installations to county and city governments.²² The successful conclusion of World War II made demobilization the central concern of America's leaders. Citizens of the Fourth District had become accustomed to the increased federal spending within the district, the state, and the nation. Their fears of an unstable economy grew. Constituents appealed to Rayburn for help in retaining, in some capacity, the airfields, hospitals, and other assets in the district.²³ During the last year of the war, the federal government, under the Surplus Property Act of 1944, had begun to liquidate surplus property, so Rayburn helped his Greenville constituents retain and gain title to the buildings from Majors Field for veterans' vocational schools as well as other structures in Fannin County at Jones Field. A notable example involved Rayburn's assistance in aiding the Bonham Independent School District's request to obtain buildings from nearby Camp Maxey.²⁴

Lastly, Rayburn received and responded to various requests in late

1945 from his farming constituents about the extended use of German prisoners of war after hostilities with Japan ceased. Their following year's onion and cotton crops were ready for harvest, and since most of America's soldiers had yet to return from abroad, farmers requested that enemy prisoners of war be retained at least until the end of the 1946 harvest. To the farmers chagrin Rayburn did nothing to aid their requests, noting that peace treaties required prisoners of war to be returned to their home nations in a reasonable amount of time after the end of hostilities.²⁵

Interpretation of history is never constant. Historians constantly re-evaluate established perspectives of seminal events, such as the Second World War. New information and evolving patterns of thought compete with established historiography, a process which often produces a complex and competing view of how a historic person or event's relationship should be interpreted. Our view and understanding of the past evolves with each new generation. Rayburn worked throughout the war to bring federal investment to the counties and towns of the Fourth District; at the same time he insisted, whenever prudent and possible, to hire locally. The resulting economic development meant that a chiefly poor, rural, agricultural populace had the opportunity to increase its standard of living during the war. Moreover, Congressman Rayburn's efforts gave the people of the Fourth District the opportunity to patriotically contribute toward America's eventual victory in World War II.

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¹⁹ Anthony Champagne, *Sam Rayburn: A Bio-Biography*, 35; Anthony Champagne, *Congressman Sam Rayburn*, 55.

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